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New Report Documents Abuse of Sahrawi Refugees' Rights in Algeria Camps

Forgotten or Forsaken? UN refugee chief says international community needs to "wake up" to plight of refugees stranded in desert for decades in "precarious conditions"

Washington, DC (October 8)—Only weeks after news reports citing the UN's refugee chief saying tens of thousands of refugees had been "forgotten" in remote desert camps in Algeria, a new study, "**GROUP RIGHTS & INTERNATIONAL LAW: CASE STUDY OF THE SAHRAWI REFUGEES IN ALGERIA**" published by the Inter-University Center for Legal Studies located at the International Law Institute tells the disturbing story of why. The study documents a serious human rights and humanitarian crisis resulting from more than three decades of warehousing of Sahrawi refugees confined to desert camps near Tindouf, in southwestern Algeria, where their legal rights and freedoms have been "routinely" violated, humanitarian aid hijacked, families split, and futures denied with no end in sight to serve a failed political agenda.

Perhaps most troubling, the study finds that both the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and relief agencies established to protect refugee rights have ignored the situation in the Algerian camps and perpetuated the abuse of the refugees' rights under international law.

"I recognize that not enough has been done and that the international community should wake up... we have to work more and better," **acknowledged António Guterres** on Sept. 10, making the first visit by a **UNHCR head** to the camps in Tindouf, Algeria since 1976. "These refugees are living for tens of years in precarious conditions."

"The International Law Institute believes the situation of the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, and their rights under international law, is in urgent need of consideration by the rest of the world," said **Don Wallace, Jr., Chairman, International Law Institute** in a preface to the report. "It is our hope this report will prompt concerted action among all nations and stakeholders involved, together with the UN and other international organizations, to resolve the decades-old situation of the Sahrawi refugees, and improve their circumstances through instruments of international law."

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS: REFUGEE RIGHTS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW/RESPECT FOR SAHRAWI RIGHTS

The report examines the role international law can play in helping refugees regain their freedom and makes specific recommendations to improve their lives and protect their rights. Among its **key findings**:

- **Refugee Rights Routinely Violated**—"Sahrawi refugees have substantial rights under international law that are either routinely violated or routinely ignored by the Polisario Front, Algeria, and UNHCR," the report says. Among these are: the right to be documented, the right to freedom of movement and employment, the right to adequate health care and education, and the right to access legal protections in the host country's judicial system.
- **Freedom of Movement Denied**—"Despite Polisario claims to the contrary, Sahrawi refugees' freedom of movement is severely restricted," the report says. "In 2003, Amnesty International expressed grave concern about the denial of the refugees' right to freedom of movement by Algerian and Polisario authorities," an issue also confirmed in the 2008 World Refugee Report of the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.
- **UNHCR Failed to Protect Refugee Rights, Prevent Hijacking of Humanitarian Aid**—The report points to various official UN agency reports and findings of independent relief organizations documenting systematic theft of humanitarian aid intended for the refugees but instead sold on black markets in the region for personal profit.
- **Imperative Refugee Rights be Respected, Warehousing Ended**—"Over the past 30 years, facts and realities on the ground have changed, while UNHCR's and Algeria's policies on refugees have not. The international system has done little to protect these warehoused refugees' rights in what has become one of the longest encamped refugee situations in the world. It is legally, morally, and financially imperative Sahrawi refugees in Algeria be granted all their rights under international law so they don't stay warehoused another 30 years," the report concludes.

Recommended specific steps for UNHCR and interested states to protect refugee rights and improve their lives include:

1. Conduct a census of the camp population and document the refugees,
2. Establish an intimidation-free voluntary repatriation program in the camps, and
3. Ensure a permanent international NGO presence in the camps to monitor distribution of humanitarian aid.

"The freedom and rights of the Sahrawi refugees have been denied and their futures stolen," **said Robert M. Holley, Executive Director, Moroccan American Center for Policy**, which authored the report in cooperation with the IUCLS. "Thirty years is long enough. We need to open the camps and help these people take back their future. We should help refugees rebuild their lives, not make being a refugee a way of life."

* **FOR A COPY OF THE FULL REPORT, GO TO: [Case Study of Sahrawi Refugees in Algeria.pdf](#)**

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